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(Mis)readings of Contemporary Magical-Realist Fiction in the Context of Romania's 2000 Literary Generation. The Case of Bogdan Popescu

Abstract: The analysis offers an overall perspective on the reading response to magical-realist novels from the 1960s to the present day, focusing on Romanian literature in the new millennium. Within this context, I shall analyze Bogdan Popescu's novel, *Whoever Falls Asleep Last* (2007), looking for the textual, paratextual and contextual causes that may explain the marginalization and fall into the waste zone "of the great unread" of a "masterpiece."

Keywords: Magical Realism; Bogdan Popescu; Contemporary Romanian Novel; Literary Canon; Reader-response Criticism.

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The Rise and Fall of a Genre? Magical Realism in Latin America and the Postcolonial World

A brief survey of magical-realist (MR) novels and the related criticism published from the 1960s to the present confirms the long-lasting career of the collocation. Beyond the abusive labeling, one can still frame a hard core of MR fiction published in the Latin-American cultural milieu, a local movement that would become a global one later, in the 1980s, and would receive further distinctive features in the Western cultural centers, in the post-colonial world, or in Central-European literatures of former-communist countries.

But, once the canonical corpus of MR novels was built, and the critical battles defined their aesthetic or political basis, strong countercurrents, which contested the MR genre appeared – right in the initial establishment centers: the McOndo movement, which sprung in Latin-American countries in the the mid-1990s, or the anti-Rushdie reaction among writers of Indian origin. Their response, ideologically colored, voices the indignation against the Western monopolization of these territories, against the



simplicistic and reductionist uses that the MR label was put to when attached to literature emerging from complex and conflictual spaces. While they contested the advertising of MR fiction as the official Literature to build the image of a country and they rebelled against the cultural Market inertia, which channeled the Westerners' reading tastes in narrow grooves, the writers within the McOndo movement conceived their texts (and their self-promoting strategies) being aware of the fact that the novels to control the literary market would eventually control the cultural image of a space, as perceived in Western cultural centers. Therefore, these counter-movements assumed, right from their inception, an ideological (and marketing) goal, sometimes effacing the aesthetic one.

The McOndo writers played their part within a new paradigm, marked by a radical displacement of binary oppositions: urban vs. rural, cosmopolitan vs. regional (national), pop culture vs. traditional culture, technical society vs. archaic communities. The new generation of writers polemized against the founding fathers of the genre, ironical over the MR tricks, perceived as false and obsolete, trying to forge a different relation between the writer and the world, the writing and the reality described, a relation unmediated by the mythical-symbolic level, and ignoring the implied metaphysics.

Plea for a Romanian Magical Realism

While assuming different causes for different cultural spaces, shaken by distinct political seisms, we state that the sinuous trajectory of MR, as previously charted, can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*,

to the field of Romanian literature. Initially independent of South-American space phenomena and later confessing to have been influenced by novel and essay translations that appeared in Romanian during the 1960 and 70s, the novels written by Ștefan Bănuțescu, D. R. Popescu or Sorin Titel may illustrate the "anthropological magical-realist fiction," founded on the revival of myths and local traditions; this was a trend that could also be explained as a reaction to the "proletcult" literature of the 1950s (imposed by the communist political power) and to "socialist realism" as the official new method for cultural creation. Authors form "the new wave of the 1960s," recovered marginal spaces and bizarre characters, writing fiction tainted with fantastic and fabulous tones, which valued the legacy of well-known inter-war writers M. Eliade, V. Voiculescu, M. Sadoveanu.

The critical reviews of these stories and novels assumed a marginal position, considering this literature as evasionist. Outside the major trends of socialist realism and the tolerated subversive realism of the "novel of the Romanian obsessive decade," the fantastic and magical-realist fiction written on mythical patterns and describing remains of archaic rituals within the new society was perceived, in those times, but also after 1989, as the true keeper of aesthetic values; it was deemed able (through themes and language register) to connect Romanian literature to the values and orientations of Western literature.

The recent major critical trends continue to see the emergence of such fiction as a secondary effect of censorship, the MR texts being symptomatic for the "drive of Romanian literature to break free into an archetypal space and stamp daily scenes



with the infratextual significance of (biblical, ancestral, historical) myth, of symbols meant to veil the historical and social realities with the fairy-like aura of another world.”¹

Trying to launch anew Ștefan Bănuțescu’s fiction and to make his literature appealing for the contemporary reader, Georgeta Horodincă² interprets the themes and registers of his books as politically subversive due to their omitting to obey the dominant directions. This was a critical approach that can be related to the postcolonial critique of the 1990s, which lit upon the MR novels as fertile for the poststructuralist analysis.

Due to this critical revisiting of MR fiction from the perspective of a peripheral, apparently anachronistic, literature, novels can assume the “minor literature” position, in Deleuzian terms.³ Despite the “major literature” of the 1950-1970 (analytic and socialist realist novels, social and historical narratives – perceived as canonical in the epoch), MR texts acquire a status of their own as a “minor literature capable of forging language from within, and make it escape on an austere, revolutionary path.”⁴

We could continue the analysis by referring to another historical turn: if we assert that there is a resemblance between postcolonialism and postcommunism,⁵ we shall observe there is a correspondence between the revival of the genre in the 1990s, in postcolonial literatures, and the use of MR repertoire by Romanian writers who published merely after 1989 (M. Cărtărescu, Doina Ruști, Filip Florian, Bogdan Suceavă). They had serious goals at stake: the recovering of collective memory (and of personal memories) and the rewriting of official History through the

lens of personal narratives. These represented a complex process generating MR visions – where the unbelievable grotesque was called upon to bear witness over the enormities and atrocities of a reality which refused itself to realistic description.

A common theme – childhood and adolescence during the communist regime – obsessively recurred for writers born during the 1960s and 70s, being highly productive even after 2000s and issuing successful novels, also well-rated by critics (*Fantoma din moară*, *Degete mici*, *Venea din timpul diez*, *Orbitor*). Most of these books appeared in the EgoProza collection launched by Polirom Publishing House in 2004, a collection that became a brand also for the new generation of fiction writers, the “Generation 2000,” as they were labeled by critics: they belonged to another age, not merely biologically, but regarding the obsessions, themes and techniques: the depiction of today’s reality through minimalist writing, apparently ignoring History and literary history, too.

Consequently, there are two generations of writers that vie for the public’s attention in the same cultural (editorial) space today: some write a MR literature, having strong filiations with the canonical texts of the twentieth century (through themes, language, aesthetic goals), while others, the “millennialists,” bet on *glocal* values, which are couched in an urban, “miserabilist” style and ignore the subtleties of traditional narratives. Like the McOndo case, these novels could be symptomatic for subtle changes in readers’ taste or the possible exhaustion of MR resources.



Bogdan Popescu's Books

Bogdan Popescu's books should easily find their place within the generous climate of contemporary Romanian fiction: "We have realists and imaginative writers, aesthetes and 'blank' writing adepts, experimentalists and practitioners of classical literary structures, explorers of the every day and explorers of imaginary spaces and so on."⁶ His first volume of short stories, *Transience Lost* (*Vremelnicia pierdută*, 2001) and the novel *Whoever Falls Asleep Last* (*Cine adoarme ultimul*, 2007),⁷ were both enthusiastically received by critics and won the author prestigious literary prizes.⁸ The two books depict the brutal experiences suffered by teenagers, servicemen, daily-traveling teachers, peasants, in late-communism and the following years after the December Revolution of 1989; his is a geography both real and symbolical, having at its core Saints Village and, at the margins, The Valley of the Mineshaft, The Livid Woods and the Water of the Dead where The One Who Sleeps endures "under bristly stalks of nettles."

Bogdan Popescu's imaginary works in the MR tradition, depicting the Creation and consumption of a community, paradoxically rewriting not only official History and the great cultural Myths, but also the canonical MR novels. An omniscient narrator mixes the stories of other two implied narrators, anti-heroic figures of the novel who elaborate subjective, highly unreliable texts: The Student (also called Monstricle, or The Drop-Out) writes six letters to a friend, which make up an ample autofiction developed on the grotesque canvas of the agonizing communist world and the postrevolutionary medley reality. It is

a dramatic score, with highly ironical and caustic accents, which portrays Saints Village and its entire gallery under these traumatic changes.

Foiște, "a genuine man of culture and of high sensitivity," the eternal "teacher on supply for all the subjects," gives six ample lectures during a "summer school," aspiring to teach the poor pupils the mythic history of their village, going back to prehistoric times, to the archetypal meeting between the Ancestor and the Maiden; his is a hilarious blending of romance, protochronistic clichés, fabulous rituals and sexual pungencies. With these inconsistent ingredients and borrowing the solemnity of great narratives, the old histrionic teacher weaves a false community chronicle "from the origins to the present moment." Only in the end are we told (by the omniscient narrator) that the Student's letters never reached their addressee, being rifled by the Teacher (thus, able to prevent the Student's suicide attempt); now only are we also informed that Teacher Foiște had unflinchingly given his lectures in front of an empty classroom, alone in the rank school building.

The critics speculated upon the futility of these discourses, on their poignant literary function,⁹ on the absence of direct addressees. The tessellated narrations build a fictional world with floating, permeable boundaries, between the world of the living and the realm of the dead (the sleeping); the fictional thread is structured by myths treated with ironic irreverence, yet claiming uniqueness due to the richness of linguistic registers which make the risibly real, the grotesquely comic, but also the tragic overlap, being filtered through the lens of (infantile or folkloric) magic.



But despite the enthusiastic criticism (praising prefaces, positive chronicles, literary prizes), B. Popescu failed to win him great noticeability. His 2007 book progressively lost altitude and its position in various classifications required by literary revues did not reflect the “masterpiece” labeling applied to it by prestigious critics when the book came out; it has risked to falling, bit by bit, out of favor with readers’ and ending up in the limbo of “the great unread.”¹⁰

Directions for Analysis. Minor. Forgotten. Invisible

Let us follow the textual, paratextual and contextual causes which led to this marginalization. Could we identify structural deficiencies and aesthetic failures in the 2007 narrative? Or does the novel fall on a peripheral line of contemporary fiction due to its theme and language? Could we discover, alongside textual clues, any unsuccessful strategies applied by a community of professional readers, responsible for putting the novel in a cloud zone? But, on the other hand, what is the weight of the professional analysis of the novel in the new cultural context? Culture is currently marked by the redeployment of influence areas between the traditionally influential factors (literary reviews) and the media (television, blogs, facebook) in a world structured on the Market model, where the writer’s status is radically different as compared to the 1980’s or even 1990s. And, finally, after we stress the possible failures at different reader response levels, we try to suggest a potential saving-scenario for taking the book out from the “invisible zone” and reopening it to new readings

by pointing to some other aspects of the novel and adapting the MR paradigm to contemporary mentalities.

The first honest step of the research is to look inside the text for possible failure clues conducive to the marginalization of the book: we refer to Paul-André Claudel’s “aesthetically minor,”¹¹ which is caused by inadequacy to genre rules and the breaking of subtle codes which govern it. Bianca Burța-Cernat¹² (the most skeptical voice in the critics’ choir) points to the author’s incapacity to structure a too vast material (marred, according to the critic by “the poetics of unending digressions and systematic incoherence”), to its prolix character and to its failed polyphony, or to the excessively poetic language and the mannerism of the fabulous, using kitsch tricks of the MR repertoire.

From a diachronic perspective, the novel could fall under the accusation of *historical anachronism*: if a book is outside the evolution of its times, it loses its legitimacy and is forgotten.¹³ We should refer here not to properties of the text, however, but to its adequacy to the public’s taste:¹⁴ what Bogdan Popescu did was express his affinities with rurality and his rural origins, the source of his imaginary and the resource for creating a coherent fictional world¹⁵. A novel about the village community, written in a poetic-archaic language (seasoned with argotic collocations), will nevertheless remain outside the actual taste for urban landscapes and minimalism.

Paul-André Claudel proposes a conceptual change to avoid the opposition *minor-major*, which implies by use, a hierarchy of values and, we should add, ambivalence (if we refer to “minor literature,” as theorized by Deleuze-Guattari).



Conceptual refining implies also a change of vision, together with a change of status: the book doesn't remain frozen at one of the poles: *memorable-forgotten, visible-in-visible*. Bogdan Popescu's novel, *Whoever Falls Asleep Last*, is almost forgotten today: it became "dead letter," mainly because "it is an answer to questions we do not hear anymore" (M. Cohen). The cosmogonic vision, created by turning upside down the mythological couple Creation-Apocalypse, life as a dream, the ontological status of the Author, the characters and the fictional worlds, the relation between official History and personal histories – are all great themes recognizable from Baroque to Romanticism, up to High Modernity and, finally, exhausted in Late Modernity. They could figure as valuable relics brought to light by sagacious critics, but, as they fall out from the horizon of the actual, they miss the launching potential; they need to be inserted within a new critical discourse which could make the novel visible again.

The strategies depicted in critical reviews could be illustrative of the discrepancies between the professionals' expectations and the public's taste. Inconstancies in reviews to be cited in what follows become symptomatic for the uncomfortable placing of reviewers on the horns of a dilemma. Critics may be ready to write with academic instruments, in order to aesthetically validate a book, yet they find themselves constrained to produce a text seasoned with quoted puns that enhance the fun and end up catering for the taste of a middle-brow reading public.¹⁶

One of the first mistakes is the "masterpiece" regime applied to the novel *Whoever Falls Asleep Last*. A bizarre coincidence makes some of the best quoted critics¹⁷ err

in the same way: they open their chronicles with a decided statement, they draw the attention upon an exceptional fiction writer, they "lay mystical words on the line"¹⁸ and they conclude bluntly: "*Whoever Falls Asleep Last* is not only a valuable novel, but a masterpiece of our post-revolutionary literature."¹⁹ Claudiu Turcuș states, apparently equivocally: "As for me, I stay humble on the side of enthusiastic reviewers, and if I told you that we really deal with a masterpiece, would you believe me?"²⁰

The high level of expectations raised in this way is not endorsed by text-analyses proper in Cosmin Ciotloș's case either.²¹ This suggests an algorithm relevant for other book reviewers: "After the first enthusiastic reading is spent [...] after the exclamatory notes in the page margins, we should take half a step back and discuss the book from the distance, conducive to welcome relativization and clarifications."²² Looking at things from the distance, he confesses: "We do not quite know what happens, exactly,"²³ and accuses the intricate stories of progressing "in an unusual combination of harsh realism and folkloric fantastic."²⁴ Aside from noting that this is a common combination for MR (as the author himself states it in the end of his chronicle), this vague approach loses the main visionary goal of the text and makes room for unprofitable relativization, which leaves it to the "strictly personal option whether to childishly believe the stories or to bluntly reject them. It is more or less optional to memorize them, as they are overwhelmingly numerous." Add to this the author's further doubting the validity of the "epigonic" ending, when he writes: "the scene is surrounded by a magical, parabolic veil, choosing the easy way of a successful



local tradition” – and you will get, in the *Literary Romania* review, the algorithm for enthusiastic beginnings evasive endings in the reception of Bogdan Popescu’s fiction.

Canonical Models

Reviewers make up long, heterogeneous lists of canonical writers invoked to certify the value and influences depicted in *Whoever Falls Asleep Last*. In the *Preface* to the novel, Daniel Cristea-Enache invokes Gabriel García Márquez, Ștefan Bănulescu and Mircea Cărtărescu for the book’s MR vein, alongside E. Barbu and Marin Preda, partially invoked as precursor for the novel’s realistic register. These names were taken, unquestioned, by other reviewers, too.²⁵ Andrei Terian takes a step aside, suggesting an analogy with Joyce: “*Whoever Falls Asleep Last* is a small *Finnegans Wake*, in which more hypnotic narrators bring to life their night fancies, thus reordering the historical flux and the cosmic geometry. This narrative pretext consequently justifies the supposed redundancies or excesses of the book, which organizes itself upon an oneiric principle; Bogdan Popescu doesn’t struggle to compose, because he doesn’t need to.”²⁶ While the oneiric reading arguably cancels the real-fabulous dichotomy, this statement promotes the easier solution of inventing a canonical precursor to justify the supposed failures of the novel.

The fluctuation between pioneering and retardation, between excellence and epigonism, playing with serious concepts or sounding names is risky, as it erodes the authority of critical discourse and makes it appear self-serving and snobbish as in “The Emperor’s New Clothes”: we do not dare to say it is prolix, as it may be Joycean, it is not unstructured, but oneiric.

Alex Goldiș’s previously cited review is important because it opens a MR gate. While it rejects Marquez’s influence, this is not the effect of a different reading to Bogdan Popescu’s text. Rather, it signals a limited interpretation of the prototype,²⁷ stating that irony, perspective, parody are absent from the Columbian writer. On the contrary, the irreverence in rewriting the founding myths is a common point of the MR canon, from Márquez to Rushdie, then to Bănulescu or Cărtărescu, as proved by many poststructuralist readings of these novels.²⁸

If we refer to Models, the effort to legitimate a “masterpiece” by recalling already canonical writers is questionable. The initial goal of conferring authority to a quasi-anonymous writer could be turned to epigonism, especially when the critic does not refer to a MR vision, but fractures the paradigm and offers two series of models: Mircea Eliade and Vasile Voiculescu for the fantastic-fabulous notes and Marin Preda and Eugen Barbu as precursors for Bogdan Popescu’s realistic-naturalistic touch. Bogdan Popescu ends up neither as close to the MR canon, nor to realism, nor again to fantastic fiction. Nicolae Bârna diagnoses things correctly when he states that this comparative zeal does not have much to say about Bogdan Popescu’s specific voice or about the value of the novel; the critic nevertheless stumbles among tautologies and generalities when asserting that B. Popescu is not “a late oneiric, but a new oneiric, with a personal manner.”²⁹

Following the association with Marquezian MR, the most frequently traced influence and a true hobbyhorse of Romanian critics Ștefan Bănulescu comes to mind first. In this line, Bogdan Popescu



continued the mythical geography of the Dicoesian Plain when building a Saints Village near the Wool Borough. Still, there are important stylistic arguments which differentiate the two writers. They were put forward by Bianca Burța-Cernat, who noticed that the formal concision and austerity of Ștefan Bănuțescu's *The Book of Metropolis* is opposed to Bogdan Popescu's baroque luxuriance, prolix style and "metaphorites." This decisive resemblance aside, one should investigate the impact on readers of the two writers' texts. What are the implications of the fact that Bănuțescu is rather forgotten, little read nowadays, being considered a fantasy rural, an aesthete with an unfinished oeuvre. For advancing Bogdan Popescu's cause, placing him in Bănuțescu's track is almost useless; and, excepting a narrow circle of *connaisseurs*, it is disadvantageous.

The interpretation errors in Bogdan Popescu's reception come from the haste to clarify details, to attribute a clear meaning to obscure facts. *Whoever Falls Asleep Last* was received as a continuation of his debut volume, as the confirmation of the writer's value.³⁰ The debut book was usable as a "glossary" of characters, to explain the homonyms in the novel. Although the reviewers remarked that the sour Mitu the Sinner is very different from the good-humored storyteller appearing in *Transience Lost* and that The One Who Sleeps has a foggy identity in the novel, unlike the precise biography detailed in the previous book, critics³¹ ended up overlapping the fictional worlds drawn by the two books. Using the debut book as a key for reading cancels the fertile ambiguity and the polysemy of the novel, limiting the polymorphic nature of The One Who Sleeps, or the metaphorical,

contradictory meanings of Saints Village. This is what prompts us to go further and consider the substantial difference between the two volumes so as to highlight *the relation between the real and the magic* in Bogdan Popescu's case. In the first volume, the two registers remain apart: the magic has rather an ornamental role. In the second book, the ability to blend the two registers is due to the founding of a complex vision, in which the magical element is more discreet, but also more efficient, being integrated within the realistic narrative.

Another common misinterpretation identifies the Dreamer with the Storyteller. For Andrei Terian "it is clear that The One Who Sleeps is always the same with The One Who Tells Stories."³² Doris Mironescu also appreciates the final move, "which assures the coherence of the narrative world from within, without appealing to the mart transcendence of metatextual fiction."³³ The people in Saints Village know that their lives are the Chase Wood Sleeper's dreams: as He dreams only nightmares, the villagers live poor lives, lives full of disasters, killings and poverty. They try rioting against The One Who Sleeps, (to replace or even to kill Him), not realizing that the Dreamer should dream His own death in order for the living to accomplish it. In the end, the two protagonists, the Student and the Teacher, go to the Chase Wood to replace The One who Sleeps, but, instead, they stumble upon an entire field of Sleepers, their ash bodies wrapped in a fine, larvae-like cloth. They end up lying near them, in sleep or in death, hoping that their dreams might generate a better life for the living.

Therefore, The One Who Sleeps is never the same with the one(s) who tell(s) stories. Dreams are atrocious, the story



tames chaos. The protagonists write/ tell their stories, even without an immediate addressee, to make sense and to master a bizarre reality. When they choose to replace The One Who Sleeps, they abandon their roles of storytellers, they pass Away, in the afterworld. (“What we are doing here is a kind of death, isn’t it?,” asks the Student). But in MR worlds the afterworld is near, next to the village, and the boundaries can be crossed both sides. That is why the Student is asked, anticipatorily, by Mr Mitu the Sinner: “You, isn’t that you who died, my lad?”³⁴

We could open here an unexplored line, a universe in which different deities live together: a little unknown god, a Sleeper, the Woman-Saint of the Valley and many more entities brought together in this inconsistent universe which lacks hierarchies and altars and where both sainthood and demonism are tamed by ironic diminutives which dislocate Meaning (*godicle, corpsy, monstricle*).

The final landscape could be interpreted as an apocalyptic one, often successfully replayed in the SF scenarios of the *Matrix* kind, putting old interrogations into new forms, making them visible again for the reader of the year 2000, creating images which overlie just partially, heretically, the baroque theme of “all life’s a dream.”

But when one casts as oneiric the Dreamer-Storyteller identity, all this richness of the text is canceled; everything gets admixed in the magma: dreams, stories, histories, dreamers, dreamed, narrators, characters; even more: the oneiric is outside the MR vision which implies a more generous model, able to accommodate divergent registers within its caucus and paradigm.

Many interpretations stress the comic, while obliterating the tragic. Critics (Alex Goldiș, Bogdan Crețu) stress “the insane humor” of the narrative, exaggerating with superlatives and neglecting the ambivalence of the discourse. Mostly, the comic slips into the grotesque and the derisory and absurd fall into the tragic.

Without questioning the reviewers’ professionalism, I believe that the errors pointed out are due, on the one hand, to interpretative inertia, motivated by the need to play all the critical instruments and to identify kinship with a list of canonical writers. On the other hand, this parade of critical intelligence, though prompted by good intentions, fails to shed light upon the novel. It condemns it to marginality, being left aside precisely because of excessively encomiastic speech, inconsistent analysis and facile, amusing puns.

Bogdan Popescu and the Generation 2000

As already shown, Bogdan Popescu’s books were unevenly received: after getting superlative reviews in prestigious periodicals when published, his novel was subsequently demoted in literary classifications and debates regarding a new Generation 2000. Its labeling as a “masterpiece” is replaced by a rather well tempered enthusiasm. Therefore, one should question whether there is a difference between the stylistic approaches and the generationist ones in today’s context. Are some of the critics forced to use two different sets of criteria? Do they resort, on the one hand, as in the previously cited reviews, to the instruments of traditional literary criticism (aesthetic criteria, thematic and stylistic



approaches and canonic filiations), or are they, on the other hand, called upon to prognosticate about the “Top 10” “canonical books” of the new millennium’s first decade and to produce, for the new literary debuts, fresh generic repertoires in opposition to the generations already accepted by literary history, working prospectively, under the pressure of literary magazines which cater to the curiosity of the public and produce continuously changing scores, rather than working retrospectively to discern the said canonical filiations? But, when making such delineations (albeit nowadays rather dusty and inefficient ones),³⁵ there will always be writers left aside when applying a particular set of criteria. Bogdan Popescu does not appear as representative in the classifications of the *new* generation precisely because he is not new at all for various reasons: biographically, but also thematically and stylistically, he is perceived rather as a later writer of the 90s. His postponed debut, after 2000, and his affirmation as a writer with the second volume in 2007 when the Generation 2000 was in full swing, puts him in an ex-centric position, outside the trend.

This implicit pressure of working with different criteria, in sync with the Cultural Market needs, and, at the same time, trying to avoid the labeling as “minor” has determined the reviewers to adopt a similar strategy and place Bogdan Popescu *against the grain* in respect to the major directions of contemporary Romanian fiction. Some reviewers have pointed to his elevated technique and style, offering a “reading as pleasant as it is laborious” (N. Bârna); others (Doris Mironescu) have stressed the risk (assumed and surpassed) to describe the village world, following the

Romanian novelists of the 1960s, creating a complex fictional world, not searching only for the colorful characters, as other contemporary writers do. Andrei Terian places Bogdan Popescu in the same canonical vein and above the actual literary landscape, asserting that his two books form “a narrative continuum, unequalled in the young fiction of the moment.”³⁶ N. Bârna stresses, rather redundantly, “the ostensible resistance” of Bogdan Popescu’s output as “valuable, true literature” and assigns him to a “strong, honorable, and generous mainstream, not affected by conventions or conservatism, industrious routine or commercial opportunism.”³⁷

With these critical statements, we go back to the thesis of “perennial values”: Bogdan Popescu cannot be against the wave, as he is immersed in the most authentic vein of Romanian fiction. It is a position partially coincident with Giorgio Agamben’s, when he states that being contemporary means staying apart, rather, keeping at a distance from one’s own times, with a certain delay, allowing for the retardation and non-identification with one’s epoch, for a gap that implies critical detachment and the awareness that a close identification with one’s time “makes one lose sight of the essential values, blinded by the evanescent lights of one’s own time.”³⁸

The majority of critics, being aware of possible reproaches for the writer’s inadequacy to the public’s tastes, write their chronicles from a defensive-aggressive position. N. Bârna ironizes the public’s demand for continuous novelty and praises, as a virtue, B. Popescu’s consistency with himself,³⁹ while Bogdan Crețu stresses the discrepancy between B. Popescu and the successful writers of the day: he is “a more

personal writer, better than most of the recent spoilt writers [...] What other young fiction-writers lack or cannot control is highly productive in this novel, which blends the appetite for storytelling with a scholarly structure, very well premeditated and pure fantasy with savory, Rabelaisian humor.”⁴⁰

A debate could be opened at this point, following the line traced by Moretti.⁴¹ Are B. Popescu’s books sacrificed in a “slaughterhouse of literature” not through the critics’ failures, but because of what they excessively value? (i.e. particular High Modernity devices: multiplied narratives and rhizomic threads, polyphony, interior monologue that has been theatrically exercised for an imaginary audience, parabolic structures, myths and fictional worlds resorted to as oneiric projections) Or because they ignore the taste of the actual reader? Could one imagine another promotion campaign, which, instead of placing him in a canonical MR filiation, would integrate his books among those surrounding him? So as to place him not above, but as a distinct voice in the millennial choir?

The way many critics describe the poetics of the new generation, the combination of despair and black humor, the “suicidal lyricism,”⁴² could be easily applied to Bogdan Popescu’s books. His humor is in a fertile symbiosis with despair, the text abounds in crimes, suicides, accidental deaths (too easily neglected in reviews), that could be justified by appealing to an idiosyncrasy akin to that of the Generation 2000 writers.⁴³ In the same direction, the obsession for the lower part of the body, with grotesque touches, the argotic language, the abjection – previously eluded devices, as they did not fit the MR picture

– could be recovered in the line of this new poetics. The construction of an ante- and post-revolutionary world, border-space between rural and urban, couched in realistic-grotesque terms and seeking resolution in the fantastic, by appealing to ironically rewritten old myths, could be reinterpreted as a recycling of MR leftovers in the literature of Central-European post-totalitarian spaces.⁴⁴

The wide cultural context has priority over critical paratexts and becomes indispensable for the reading of a book, as Alexandru Matei bluntly puts it:⁴⁵ the literature of the Generation 2000 cannot be perceived outside the context of its evolution. The traditional image perspective of a literary space structured in centers and margins is replaced by a literary space conceived as a Market niche, where the authors are placed from the beginning, where (self) promoting strategies are conceived, and where there are different influential factors, unlike the model proposed by Moretti.⁴⁶

Anticipating such changes in perspective, critics continue to place B. Popescu in the old paradigm, considering him, “so confident in the resources of his writing that he considered it unnecessary to make even the smallest gesture for self-promotion” in comparison with his generation colleagues, who “have learned the advertizing lesson, the PR and marketing movements, and support their work through popular magazine writings, interviews, debates, book launches, public readings, TV shows, blogs... They improve the occasion, by taking the given context and transforming it into an opportunity.”⁴⁷

Although he accepts this rule, Daniel Cristea-Enache empathically absolves Bogdan Popescu, taking him outside the Market games, in favor of the Romantic model:



“Too blunt for these games, or maybe bored of them, *like every true creator*, immersed up to the eyes in his artistic universe, Bogdan Popescu is an exception for a cultural world dizzied by merely shining wrappings.”⁴⁸ The statement is taken critically by Claudiu Turcuș, who denounces the “hypocritical and anachronistic logic” of people who do not consider advertising as imperative. “Furthermore, following the journey of the book as a commercial product and following the cultural pragmatics, I wonder, again, whether publicity, today, has come to be more than a strategy, rather than a condition for reading.”⁴⁹

Following these suggestions, a debate about the meaning of “minority” in literature should take as a starting point the new configuration of the cultural field. If in the 1990s, as Al. Matei observes, writing was rather a “marginal activity, subversive against the visible social practices,” continuing the model of the 1980s (a model likely to be embraced also by B. Popescu),⁵⁰ slowly, in the 2000s, the old regime of literature is replaced by new attitudinal models: the star-author, writing/ performing under the scene-lights, attending cultural events, active in virtual spaces (blogs, facebook), with periodical issues, so as to remain in the critics’ and the public’s attention. Contextual aspects become more prominent than the critics’ confirmation, but they impact, backwards, even on the professional perception: a writer who has published only two fiction books in the last fifteen years, who has little success with the public, has no translation, no reprints; he risks remaining frozen at the moment of his first published volume, forgotten, unread, falling out of the critics’ attention and of the literary historians’ who make “the canon.”

We are referring to the “ecology of attention,” as Yves Citton calls it:⁵¹ a great number of good books compete to have the (limited, fragmented) attention of a decreasing public. Therefore, not only the inner characteristics of a book, nor again the critical strategies of reading (i.e. with textual and paratextual criteria), but, more importantly, the dynamics of the cultural context marks the destiny of a writer.



Bogdan Popescu’s novel *Whoever Falls Asleep Last* is good enough to figure in a “top 10” of the 2000s, but there is a series of critical strategies of promotion that risk to put it in the zone “of the great unread”: the use of excessive labeling; the neglect of structural deficiencies; putting his fiction under elitist umbrella terms and concepts (polyphony, oneirism); Bogdan Popescu’s epigonic placing in the wake of canonical MR writers (Márquez), and also not necessarily successful ones (Bănuțescu); making monochord interpretations that stress the humor, but elude the dramatic, tragic or grotesque notes. Add to these in the cultural field the author’s lack of visibility and his neglect of (self)promoting strategies, his constant positioning against the grain of his generation colleagues and his lack of interest in seducing the public by offering some reward along with a massive, “difficult” book, with a peripheral theme in contemporary fiction.

Still, there are other possible readings that might help relaunch the book: I believe that the MR recipe could be used nowadays only in so far as the author does not end up in the lineage of great models, but innovates starting from them. The



novel could significantly increase its audience if positioned its ideal reader at the crossing of pre-existing types: if it were seen to interpellate the traditional reader, interested in folkloric beliefs, and to seduce the postmodern reader looking for rewritings of Myths, provoking him with a syncretic vision which takes off from archaic into SF scenarios and offers a metaphysical layer to the narrative; if it were seen as flirting (outside the arena!) with the metatextual games of the 1980s, without ignoring the documentary value of fiction for some of today's readers, while grotesquely hyperbolizing the description, entering into resonance with the sensibility of the 2000s. The strong values of this novel remain the narrative luxuriance and the stylistic balance between the argotic and the lyrical, between the scabrous and the sweet.

A Pierre Ménard of the 2000s *malgré soi* and against the benevolent critics who, while digging for a masterpiece, dug him out of his generation, Bogdan Popescu

writes, under Ștefan Bănulescu's cloak, about obsolete themes, with elitist instruments; he writes a reversed Cosmogony starting with (post)Apocalypse (the cart loaded with devils, juggling into a world of ashes) and ending with the installation of a new Dreamer; he places the Dicomesian Plain in a reversible, gummy temporality (the Danube refuses to flow and turns upstream), building a *Matrix*-like configuration, where the characters in the Saints Village are placed in niches that communicate to each other through an endless web of stories. Similar to other great novels of the 2000s, which appeal to successful ingredients from popular culture (Ruști's *The Ghost in the Mill* and *poltergeist* phenomena, Cărtărescu's *Orbitor* and the SF scenario of an alien invasion), Bogdan Popescu can be re-read in one of these keys, not dislocated from his publication context, but included in it, if one wishes to use the reading lens offered by the sensibility of contemporary readers.

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NOTES

1. Vali Dogaru, "Utopia controversată sau trăită a cotidianului," *Vatra*, no. 5-6, 2005.
2. Georgeta Horodincă, *Ștefan Bănulescu sau Ipotezele scrisului*, București, DU Style, 2002, p. 172.
3. Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*, Paris, Les Éditions du Minuit, 1975.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 35 [my translation]: "comment arracher à sa propre langue une littérature mineure, capable de creuser le langage, et de le faire filer suivant une ligne révolutionnaire sobre?"
5. Cf. Ion Bogdan Lefter, "Poate fi considerat postcomunismul un post-colonialism?," in *Despre identitate. Temele postmodernității*, Pitești, Paralela 45, 2004, p. 22-26; Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu, "Soviet Cultural Colonialism: Culture and Political Domination in the Late 1940s – Early 1950s Romania," *Trames*, no. 16, 2012, pp. 77-93, available online at http://www.kirj.ee/public/trames_pdf/2012/issue_1/trames-2012-1-77-93.pdf, accessed January 8, 2017.
6. Bianca Burța-Cernat, "Nu sunt încă sigură că generația 2000 există" (I am not yet confident that Generation 2000 actually exists), *Vatra*, no. 3/2009, "Bilanțul douămiismului," investigation by Alex Goldiș, p. 44.
7. Translation by Alistair Ian Blyth, available online at <http://www.romanianwriters.ro/author.php?id=30>, accessed January 14, 2017.
8. Romanian Academy Prize in 2001 for the debut volume; 2007 Fiction Prize awarded by the Bucharest Writers' Association, 2007 National Fiction Prize awarded by the *Ziarul de Iasi* magazine.



9. Luminița Corneanu, *Mitologii*, available online at https://luminitacorneanu.files.wordpress.com/-2013/11/cine-adoarme-ultimul_1_fullsize.jpg, accessed December 12, 2016.
10. Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *MLQ*, March 2000, p. 225.
11. Paul-André Claudel, "Écrivains fantômes, fantômes d'écrivains : la part cachée de l'héritage littéraire," in C. Zekri, B. Rodriguez (éd.), *La notion de «mineur» entre littérature, arts et politique*, Paris, Michel Houdiard, 2013, pp. 43-54, available online at lamo.univnantes.fr/IMG/pdf/Ecrivains_fantomes_fantomes_d_ecrivains.pdf, accessed December 18, 2016.
12. Bianca Burța-Cernat, "Derapaje realist-magice," *Observator cultural*, no. 111, 19-25 April/2007, p. 15.
13. Paul-André Claudel, "Écrivains fantômes..."
14. Harold Bloom explains in a similar way the marginality of esthetically remarkable works, which fail, however, to satisfy contemporary taste either thematically or stylistically (*The Western Canon*, p. 21).
15. Elena Vlădăreanu, interview with Bogdan Popescu, "Scrisul e o sărbătoare dureroasă pe care nu-mi permit să mi-o ofer prea des," *Suplimentul de cultură*, no. 60, 5-11 January, 2008, pp. 6-7.
16. Alex Goldiș, "Viața și (mai ales) faptele literare ale lui Bogdan Popescu," *Cultura*, no. 67, 12.04.2007: "Let me tell you that I haven't over-inflated my critical judgment artificially, neither have I taken risks, not at all: this is the plain truth. I swear to God's all saints that this is so." Available online at: <http://revistacultura.ro/cultura.php?articol=1110>, accessed December 15, 2016.
17. Alex Goldiș, Andrei Terian, Claudiu Turcuș, Daniel-Cristea Enache, Cosmin Ciotloș, Nicolae Bărna, Bogdan Crețu.
18. Alex Goldiș, "Viața."
19. *Ibid.*
20. Claudiu Turcuș, "Somn pe trei voci," *Vatra*, no. 6, 2007, pp. 92-93.
21. Cosmin Ciotloș, "Cine citește primul," *România literară*, no. 12/2007, p. 7.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Doris Mironescu, "Nepoții lui Moromete," *Suplimentul de cultură*, no. 114, 10.02.2007; when referring to fantasy and popular rites, he adds Mircea Eliade and Vasile Voiculescu.
26. Andrei Terian, "Cine visează primul?" *Cultura*, no. 87, 30.08.2007.
27. Alex Goldiș, "Viața": the description at the end of the review is a kind of handbook definition of MR: "When switching from one dimension to the next, the novelist does not set up boundaries; the most idyllic dreams get rapidly but naturally altered to become nightmares, and incidents of the gravest kind are narrated with an eerie detachment."
28. Linda Hutcheon, Regina Janes, Raymond Williams, Vera M. Kutzinski, Anibal González, Roberto González Echevarría, Humberto E. Robles, Patricia Tobin, Morton P. Levitt. Cf. Harold Bloom, *Gabriel García Márquez* (Modern Critical Views), Chelsea House Publishers, 1999.
29. Nicolae Bărna, "Marginalii întârziate la un roman cam... fără pereche," *Cultura*, no. 67/2008.
30. Bianca Burța-Cernat is the only voice accusing the book of precocious mannerism while, rather skeptically, waiting for a third book.
31. Andrei Terian, "Cine visează primul."
32. *Ibid.*
33. Doris Mironescu, "Nepoții lui Moromete."
34. Bogdan Popescu, *Cine adoarme ultimul (Whoever Falls Asleep Last)*, Iași, Polirom, 2007, p. 237.
35. As Paul Cernat, Bianca Burța-Cernat and Alexandru Matei assert.
36. Andrei Terian, "Cine visează primul."
37. Nicolae Bărna, "Marginalii întârziate."
38. Giorgio Agamben, *Qu'est-ce que le contemporain ?*, Paris, Éd. Payot & rivages, 2008, p. 11.
39. Nicolae Bărna, "Marginalii întârziate."
40. Bogdan Crețu, "Lumea ca vis al Celui ce Doarme," *Observator cultural*, no. 111, 19-25 April 2007.
41. Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," p. 228.



42. Alexandru Matei, "Generația de tranziție. De la societatea piramidală la societatea de nișă," *Vatra*, no. 3/2009, p. 36.
43. Nicolae Bârna, "O înnoire mai pregnantă decât a nouăzeciștilor," *Vatra*, no. 3/2009, p. 40.
44. Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, Danilo Kiš.
45. Alexandru Matei, "Generația de tranziție."
46. Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature." The Italian critic builds a tree-like image of the literary space, analyzes books already accepted or neglected by the canon, using a cluster of characteristics that could be identified inside the texts. But if we assumed that the traditional instruments – the pyramidal literary world, the making of the canon, the generation criteria, the "literary history" view – are a matter of the past, as Al. Matei argues, then we need new, valid methods to discuss the fiction of the 2000s.
47. Daniel Cristea Enache, "Ape adânci," foreward to the novel *Cine adoarme ultimul*, p. 5.
48. *Ibid.*, p.5
49. Claudiu Turcuș, "Somn pe trei voci."
50. Elena Vlădăreanu, interview with Bogdan Popescu, "Scrisul e o sărbătoare." We can deduce here, from the author's isolation and the relation with his writing as a "painful red-letter," a Neo-Romantic mentality pattern.
51. Yves Citton, "Une écologie de l'attention," interview realized by Ariel Kyrou, available online at <http://www.culturemobile.net/visions/yves-citton-ecologie-attention>, accessed January 8, 2017.